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CHAPTER IV

Hospitality

Hospitality is one of the customs which is mentioned and praised by everyone who has visited the Caucasus, since it has been found to be practiced by all peoples of the country, regardless of their language, religion or ethnic differences. In discussing these customs, however, no writer has ever made any discrimination in the practice of these customs among the various tribes.

However, we think that the customs of hospitality as practiced by the Georgians of the Highlands and Lowlands alike are different in some way from those of the other mountaineers of the Caucasus. If we review the customs of hospitality as practiced by the Georgians, and on the other hand, by the other mountaineers, we shall see at once the difference. With the Georgians, every stranger may be sure to find a genuine and hearty reception, in every corner of Georgia and among all its different groups. No questions are asked and no introduction is necessary. On the other hand, with the Circassians and the other mountaineers, in order to enjoy the privileges of their hospitality, a stranger must be introduced by someone, if not personally at least *in absentia*. A guest is known to them by the name of *kunak*, called *conaco* in the writings of the Italian missionary, Georgio Interiano, who describes the life and customs of the Circassians (16th century). Besides Interiano, the customs of hospitality are related by other travelers. They all stress the high esteem for the guest, which often reaches sanctity. The Englishman, Bell, in the beginning of his book (1840), mentions that it was necessary for him and his companions, when landing on the Circassian coast, to name the Circassian whose friends (*kunaks*) they were. Otherwise, he remarks, they could not count on the hospitality of the people, because every stranger who had no *kunaks* among the Circassians was at once seized, taken into slavery and kept a slave or sold to the Turks. People who have

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574 604 171 visited the Circassians have stated that these people consider their customs of hospitality as sacred, and that there were no examples of the violation of this custom by the mistreatment or molestation of a guest by his host.

In describing his prejudices against the Circassians, and the many good traits in their manner of life and customs, as he actually found them, Taitbout de Marigny[1] writes about the sacred sentiments of hospitality: "Combien je ne trompais, et qu'il est respectable et sacré le sentiment que les Tcherkesses attachent à l'hospitalité! On voit chez eux cette vertu mise en action, tandis que chez nous elle n'est que dans les écrits des philosophy." "The Kabardian," writes Klaproth,[2] "is a most scrupulous observer of the custom of hospitality and when he has taken any person under his protection, or received him as his guest, the latter may repose implicit confidence in him, and trust his life in his hands: never will he betray or deliver him up to his enemies." Similar information may be found in the reports and writings of everyone who has visited these people.

574 604 The sanctity of the person of a guest as that term is understood among the Georgians. The Pshavs and Khevsurs, like many other mountain folk, place a high value upon hospitality.[3] They regard hospitality as something sacred.[4] "To them a guest is a sacred person," writes Prince Vakhoust, in describing the life and customs of the Georgians of Kartli; "they are hospitable and love strangers."

Numerous other writers have commented on the hospitality of the Georgians and other mountaineers of the Caucasus. The sanctity of this virtue is manifest in the everyday language, songs, and literature of the people. For example, the writer well remembers a song, popular among the college men of the Caucasus, which was sung in the Russian language and which said that the guest is sent by God. The first lines are as follows:

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[1] Taitbout de Marigny: 263.
[2] Klaproth: 318.
[3] Eristov: 129; Gurko-Kriajin: 265.
[4] Zisserman: 213.

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Nam kajdi gost darovan Bogom
Kakoi bi ni bil on sredi
Khotia bi v rubis'che ubogom,
Allaverdi, Allaverdi.

In English translation:

Every guest is given to us by God,
No matter from which country he may be—
Even if clothed in rags,
Allaverdi, Allaverdi.[5]

The phenomenon of regarding the person of a guest as sacred occurs not only in the Caucasus, but is found in different human groups in all parts of the world. A stranger is given a cordial and friendly reception by some people, while among others he is treated roughly, robbed, and in some instances put to death. "Side by side with gross indifference to or positive hatred of strangers, there is an institution which, it seems, prevails universally among the lower races while in their native state and which also prevailed among cultured peoples in the earlier stages of their civilization, namely, the custom of hospitality towards strangers."[6] These contrasting attitudes toward the stranger have their foundation in the beliefs concerning his personality. The stranger is regarded either as a benefactor or as a source of evil.[7] In the latter case the principal motive of hospitality is the "fear of the stranger."[8] And it is said by Ainus:[9] "Do not treat strangers slightingly, for you never know whom you are entertaining." "Every traveler found a cordial welcome among the Celto-Iberians, because they considered those who were in the company of strangers as beloved by the gods."[10]

Hospitality such as was found among the Georgians of the Caucasus was universal among the peoples of the East. "Hospi-

[5] Allaverdi, meaning "God (be) with you."
[6] Westermarck: c, 50.
[7] *Ibid.*, c, 55.
[8] Muhlmann: 463.
[9] Batchelor: 114.
[10] Gerig: 799.

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tality among the Semitic and Eastern peoples in general rests upon religious sanctions. To be inhospitable was not only to be despicable, it was also to be irreligious. Hospitality was a sacred duty."[11]

The doors of every Georgian family are wide open to the stranger. He is cordially welcomed and entertained. If the family of the host is poor, the relatives and neighbors come to his assistance, supplying what is necessary for the entertainment of the guest.

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[11] Gruickshank: 816.